

Page 6: Theories of Truth

Subjectivism

Subjectivism is the incorrect notion that truth is relative to individuals. Here is what the theory says. (Remember, this theory is incorrect.)

Do not confuse subjective claims with subjectivism. They are different concepts.

1. Truth depends upon what each person believes it to be.
2. Truth itself is subjective, not objective.
3. Subjectivists say things like, "This is my truth and that's your truth." and, "That may be true for you, but it's not true for me."

Consider the following:

1. The earth moves around the sun.
2. $2 + 2 = 4$.
3. Bachelors have no wives.
4. Dogs aren't cats.
5. World War II actually happened.

Problems with subjectivism

1. If we could make a statement true by believing it to be true, we'd be infallible.
2. If everyone made their own truth, disagreement would be pointless.
3. EVERYONE would be right!

Relativism

Relativism is the incorrect notion that truth is relative to societies. (Remember, this theory is incorrect.)

Do not confuse relative claims with relativism. They are different concepts.

1. Also known as "Social Relativism."
2. Relativism is the idea is that something could be true for the French but false for the Chinese.
3. Implications of relativism
 - a. Social infallibility
 - b. If the whole of society accepted anything as true, then it would be true.
Example: The earth is flat.
Example: Jews must be exterminated.
Example: It's all right to own slaves.

The fact is that groups as well as individuals are prone to error.

c. If society were infallible, then it would be impossible to disagree with society and be right.

Reformers would automatically be wrong.

Nothing in society could ever change. Institutions like slavery, or the practice of

arresting innocent people and torturing them would be acceptable always.

A Few Final Words on Relativism

1. Relativism presents itself in many forms. Some disguise it as "tolerance," or "multiculturalism." Though tolerance or multiculturalism don't always lead to relativism, often it does. Watch out to see if the person using these terms is really promoting relativism.
2. Postmodernism is essentially relativism and is illogical at the outset. When you hear the term "postmodern" watch out for a promotion of relativism.
3. Fundamentally, every form of relativism is self-refuting. That means that the very claims that it makes are all it takes to prove that it could not be true.

Philosopher J.P. Moreland defines self-refutation: "When a statement fails to satisfy itself (i.e., to conform to its own criteria of validity or acceptability), it is self-refuting.

Example: "I cannot say a word in English."

Clearly the words ARE in English, so the claim cannot be true.

Example: "Every judgment can be reduced to a 'cultural perspective.'"

It is itself a judgment. Using their own words, the judgment is merely a cultural perspective, something that cannot be objectively and universally true.

Example: "All truth is relative."

This claim is a universal absolute, so the claim itself proves that NOT all truth is relative.

Example: "No one can say what's right or wrong."

This sentence is claiming what is right, there very thing the claim says no one can do.

4. Relativism's Seven Fatal Flaws

1. Relativists can't accuse others of wrongdoing.
2. Relativists can't complain about the problem of evil.
3. Relativists can't place blame or accept praise.
4. Relativists can't make charges of unfairness or injustice.
5. Relativists can't improve their morality.
6. Relativists can't hold meaningful moral discussions.
7. Relativists can't promote the obligation of tolerance.

A Basis for Ethics

A. Introduction

The purpose of this section is to prove that normative claims are often objective and absolute. Many people believe that all moral beliefs are subjective and a "matter of opinion." People think this for two main reasons. First, they are taught this (more accurately "propagandized") in school and through the media. Second, they see that moral issues are sometimes a matter of disagreement, so they conclude that these issues are a matter of mere opinion. (You may wish to review the nature of truth and the nature of claims before continuing.)

"Disagreement" is not equal to "no right answer."

If you found yourself in a discussion with someone who insisted that people lived on the moon, would you say that you were both right? Of course not. The person who says people live on the moon is wrong, no matter how intensely they believe it.

At this point, some people say that morality is different, because you can prove that no one lives on the moon, but no one can prove anything about morality. This is shallow thinking at best, and it is difficult to accept that anyone really believes it (even though plenty of people say it).

Ask yourself this question, Do you have any beliefs about what is right or wrong? Of course you do. You almost certainly think it would be wrong for someone to kill you after class. We hold a position and argue it because we believe it is true, not only for ourselves, but for everyone. If the position weren't worth arguing, it wouldn't be worth holding.

B. The Three Bases for Ethics

People are animals (in a biological sense).

People are social.

People are rational.

1. People are Animals (in a biological sense)

a. People have physical bodies which have the following characteristics;

- 1) matter (i.e., "stuff")
- 2) exist in time and space.
- 3) subject to physical laws

This means . . .

b. All humans have the capacity to experience the following;

- 1) pain
- 2) deprivation
- 3) danger

2. People are Social

a. This means that there are issue of community:

- 1) Fairness
- 2) Justice
- 3) Equality

3. People are Rational

a. Basic concepts to all are . . .

- 1) Time
- 2) Space
- 3) Causation

b. We are autonomous moral agents, which means . . .

- 1) We have free choice
- 2) We understand the concept of ought

C. Conclusion

Because there is a basis for ethics which applies to all people, regardless of their culture, their location, or their time in history, it necessarily follows that moral claims have the quality of being true or false. They are frequently absolute. They are rarely a matter of personal truth (a term critical thinkers avoid).